

Barriers and motivators to attaining a school-based MA in Education: a case study

Margaret Etherington

University of East London, UK

Abstract

A school-based master's programme was provided for teachers at a comprehensive in the East End of London, UK. Two traditional barriers to doing an MA (cost and travelling time) were removed. The study explores the extent to which teachers' workload, family commitments and other external factors impact on the retention of MA participants. It was found that heavy job and family obligations were not necessarily predictors of failure to complete the course, and that personal values and aspirations had a greater bearing on attaining the award than work/life balance. It emerged that the minority ethnic backgrounds of the teachers interviewed might well be a significant factor in their determination to attain a master's degree.

Keywords: ethnicity; master's degree; retention; school-based MA

Introduction

In 2008, the education faculty at the University of East London (UEL) in the UK successfully applied for Training and Development Agency (TDA) funding to offer accredited school-based postgraduate professional development to teachers at a fraction of the normal fee, in the form of a bespoke master's programme. It was a new approach designed to address factors previously found to hinder take-up of master's study in the university's education faculty, namely cost, the time-consuming nature of study at that level, low relevance of the content to the students' teaching role, and misconceptions regarding the demands of an MA. The new programme was informed by research available at the time, particularly a meta-analysis that focuses on what counts as effective continuing professional development (CPD) (Cordingley et al. 2005). Although the programme was well received by schools who entered into a partnership with the university to engage in postgraduate study, participant

retention was variable. This was despite the fact that frequently the course fees were paid in entirety by the partnership schools where the teachers were employed. Even with such an attractive inducement, considerably more teachers enrolled for study on an MA in Education than subsequently completed the award, a situation also reported in an article by Arthur et al. (2006). There is little research that explains retention in master's level (M-level) CPD; however, the research undertaken by Arthur et al. (2006) did identify motivating and inhibiting factors in relation to the completion of postgraduate awards by some teachers. Their findings were used as a comparison when evaluating the completion rate at one particular school used as a case study for this paper. The school, Laurel Way Community School (pseudonym), an 11–16 co-educational comprehensive in an east London area of high deprivation, was one of the first to complete the programme.

Literature

An aim of the previous Labour government was to make teaching a master's level profession (DCSF 2007) in order to improve standards of provision for schoolchildren. To this end, the TDA for schools in England made government funding available for master's level professional development, including the Masters in Teaching and Learning commencing 2010. Collaboration in terms of peer support and specialist input has been shown to impact significantly on the quality of professional development. A range of literature analysed by Cordingley et al. (2005) establishes collaborative CPD in schools as leading to improved motivation, confidence and development of practice among teachers. Furthermore, a subsequent meta-analysis (Cordingley and Bell 2012) highlights increased benefits to pupils if staff CPD has been informed by outsourced expertise as well as being collaborative. Ofsted (2010) also found that the most effective CPD occurs when it accesses some external support, in addition to being both school-based and facilitating reflection on teachers' learning. Thus the new funding had the potential to facilitate high-level

provision for teachers by utilising aspects of proven best practice. Nevertheless, once implemented, retention on such courses was variable. Arthur et al. (2006) named the following features that were found to assist the completion of a master's degree in education. In priority order, they are:

- supportive workplace
- tutor availability
- relevant, clear and timely tasks
- time for tasks in school
- explicit deadlines
- own determination and family support
- fast and formative feedback.

Although these findings were based on questionnaires to students, of which only 25% were returned, thus possibly providing a limited perspective on the issue, they formed a starting point for a similar investigation at Laurel Way. It emerged from the preliminary findings at the case study school that teachers from BME (black and minority ethnic) backgrounds showed greater persistence with their postgraduate studies than their white colleagues, a characteristic that appears, from the literature, to start earlier in their lives. Mirza (2006) argues that among black and Asian socially marginal groups there is a shared focus on the importance of education for their children in order to access the mainstream labour market. Her claim is substantiated by the statistic she cites that, compared to young white people, there are proportionally almost three times as many who are black or from Asian backgrounds in higher education in Britain. A more recent source (UCAS 2013) states a further 70% increase in black pupils applying to become full-time university undergraduates *since* Mirza's article of 2006. Through such aspirations, people from minority ethnic groups 'seek social transformation' (2006: 19) to improve their life chances and career prospects, ultimately transcending racist expectations.

Based on a study among British Asians, Basit (2013) also finds an emphasis on acquiring educational 'capital' among these families where the younger generation is strongly supported by other family members towards upward social mobility. As well as the value of education being impressed upon the young, the dire material consequences of not studying hard are articulated and reinforced, often reflecting the economic status of working-class parents or grandparents. These attitudes could help to account for retention at master's level despite the participants being engaged in busy careers. The value of postgraduate professional development

to both schools and individuals notwithstanding, government desire for teaching to become a master's level profession was relatively short-lived. The current Coalition has not only declined to pursue this direction, but is arguably undermining it further by moving Initial Teacher Education away from universities and professional learning that develops 'a critical stance to policy and practice' (Turner and Simon 2013: 20), towards school-based observation and adoption of practical teaching skills.

Methodology

The current methodology, an interpretive case study, differed from that of Arthur et al. (2006). It involved separate interviews with the eight teachers who had completed the MA in Education at the case study institution, and who happened to be four men and four women. Arthur et al. (2006), on the other hand, had distributed 180 questionnaires to teachers from different schools and phases who had started M-level award-bearing courses but had not necessarily completed them, with a 25% return rate. The interviews, conducted according to ethical guidelines (BERA 2011), were semi-structured, and as their former tutor I had been known to the interviewees for three years. Whereas the teachers in the Arthur et al. study were asked to give a score to named factors perceived to assist learning, I wanted these factors, where present, to come from the respondents themselves to a greater extent. The Arthur et al. article named features that were found to assist completion of a master's degree. In my enquiry, these elements provided a comparison to findings from the case study school.

Findings

Comparison to previous research

The Laurel Way teachers found the support of their colleagues to be of considerable benefit. Collaboration with fellow master's participants, including shared reading, was widespread and valued during the first module. It also helped a great deal with confidence. In later modules, mutual support was more sporadic and informal, but reported to be still present.

Networking with colleagues was held to be the second main source of support when modules proved challenging. Such collaboration echoes a range of findings cited by Cordingley et al. (2005) that this type of CPD is particularly effective.

However, seven of the eight teachers considered the *main* source of support when modules proved difficult was the tutor giving quick, reassuring responses. Three out of eight had found that one of the most useful aspects of the tutor's role was to have provided them with a clear structure and/or timeline for their studying, with specific interim and final deadlines. The most useful aspect of the tutor's role was, for five out of eight, emailed advice and feedback. For four out of eight it was one-to-one tutorials. Without exception, all interviewees thought the master's modules provided by the university were relevant and/or useful to their teaching roles. An external tutor's input had previously been established as beneficial (Ofsted 2010; Cordingley et al. 2012), as had the opportunity for teachers to reflect on their learning (Ofsted 2010).

Arthur et al. (2006) cited a supportive workplace as being the factor that most influenced retention. Laurel Way teachers were somewhat aggrieved that school management had neglected to offer them any time concession for studying, and therefore considered the school had been unsupportive of their MA work. In saying this, they overlooked the fact that the school had financed the whole award, and also that staff had 20% non-contact time in their teaching timetable. All interviewees agreed that the fact of the school paying for their MA was of great importance in deciding to start it, and five of the eight claimed it was a *crucial* factor. Thus it can be argued that the culture of the focus school, in terms of both management and fellow MA participants, did in fact contribute to the facilitation of the award.

All eight teachers reported that their families had been positive and supportive with regard to starting the MA in Education. Only the men mentioned their spouses, however: all four men said that their wives had been very encouraging. With regard to balancing work and personal commitments with studying, six out of eight teachers reduced the time spent with their families, including sending them away to relatives in the school holidays; three out of eight achieved this balance by sacrificing their own holidays altogether. When asked what attitudes most enabled them to succeed in gaining an award, similarities in response from every interviewee emerged.

'Being organised, determined, and never giving up. You've got to finish what you've started.'
(male teacher)

'My personality always gets things done. I don't leave things unfinished.' (female teacher)

Tenacity as a personality trait influenced their motivation to see it through. This section, so far, has contained reference to those responses that relate closely to the findings of Arthur et al. (2006) concerning factors contributing to retention, including a supportive workplace, tutor and family. The following section refers to further topics that emerged from the interview data.

The main advantage of the MA sessions being based in the teachers' workplace was perceived by the majority (six out of eight) to be that they did not have to travel to the university. Indeed, half (four) of the respondents considered that having to travel the one mile to the campus for study sessions would have adversely affected their participation and retention. Although not specifically mentioned in the previously published article, resistance to the CPD due to the stated 'personal inconvenience' (Arthur et al. 2006: 202) could be apposite here. Furthermore, Ofsted (2010) found school-based CPD to be the most successful. Although the university contrived to address time management problems among the teachers by including such strategies as shared reading of substantive texts, writing segments of the module assignment over the term, and basing the assessment on participants' own practice, respondents reported that assignments generally had to be written in the school holidays.

Regarding assessment, Arthur et al. (2006) stated that most of the teachers who responded to their questionnaire were positive about their written assignments. Certainly at the case study school there were no complaints from graduates as to the nature of the course, deadlines or assessment tasks. They found the relevance of assessment to their teaching roles very high; however, actually working towards completing the assignments was often found to be problematic and unenjoyable. The most challenging aspects of study were to do with meeting deadlines, and also reading academic articles: keeping up to date with this, understanding the content of the articles and writing about them critically. The most rewarding element was passing modules or finishing the MA (six out of eight), with only two teachers indicating that the knowledge they acquired was more rewarding. Clearly, the Laurel Way cohort found their studies difficult and time-consuming, yet they remained remarkably focused on ultimate completion. The extent to which the master's degree was valued by the graduates was evidenced in the interview data. All but one of them had asked the school to finance an MA in Education before the university became involved. Three expressed the view that the award was

more valued abroad than in the UK, and two believed it would be particularly useful to them professionally when they eventually return to their countries of origin.

An interesting observation that may or may not have been significant given the small size of the research cohort was that there seemed to be a cultural dimension to the retention of participants. The school-based MA was strongly promoted by an African deputy head teacher; the subsequently appointed white British head teacher was not in favour of continuing with master's study at his school. Whereas the staff population as a whole was 40% white British, all the MA graduates were from minority ethnic backgrounds, the original white British MA students having dropped out. In order to see whether there might be a different value attached to a master's degree in certain communities, one respondent was invited to take part in a further interview to explore this point, as follows.

Differing cultural attitudes towards a master's degree

This MA graduate, Zahir (pseudonym), who came to England from Bangladesh as a child, subsequently took up a headship at a newly opened secondary school. I interviewed him further regarding the status of a master's degree among minority ethnic participants. His comments reflected both his Bangladeshi background and his experience of being a teacher in the UK.

He explained that a master's has a higher status than even considerable monetary wealth in Bangladesh, and that a multi-millionaire there has limited social mobility if they lack educational qualifications. He added that a master's degree, particularly from a British university, is 'very highly regarded' in developing countries to the extent that students from overseas, or their sponsors, are prepared to meet the significant expense of studying in the UK (fees are appreciably higher for foreign students). An explanation offered for the wives of the male respondents being especially supportive of their studying for the MA is that the award is seen as a tool for further promotion in a context where 'minorities struggle to climb the ladder'. Zahir found that having an MA in Education gave him more confidence of success among other candidates applying for a school management position; he is of the opinion that white people are able to rely on workplace experience and length of service to a greater extent than BME applicants. Furthermore, that teaching experience is viewed as a higher priority than master's level qualifications in the UK education system. For BME candidates, however, additional

qualifications appear to be required to access senior posts in this country. In Zahir's view, tokenism results in BME teachers gaining middle management positions; however, reaching senior management level 'is extremely hard' for them. Headships for BME applicants, he suggested, are more dependent on having an extra qualification such as a master's degree or doctorate. For white aspirants, though, 'you don't need an MA to be a head teacher'. For Zahir, then, education is viewed as able to bring about the 'social transformation' described by Mirza (2006: 19).

Zahir offered a perspective on the value of the MA beyond its potential to level the playing field for promotional prospects in an inherently racist society. Not only do minority ethnic job applicants need to be better qualified than their white British counterparts in order to access senior management positions, the perceived value of education in their families' country of origin may also have a bearing on the retention of students. Moreover, the greater importance generally attached to length of service and workplace experience than to higher degrees when recruiting management staff in the UK could help to explain why all Zahir's white British colleagues withdrew from the MA.

Discussion

A comparison to the previously published study on motivators and barriers to completion (Arthur et al. 2006) was that family support was a distinct feature among the Laurel Way teachers. From the interviews it emerged clearly that these teachers' families valued the MA and encouraged them to study. Nevertheless, it appeared that the personal attributes and values of the MA participants themselves were an even stronger contributor to retention. It was clear from the interviews that teachers who completed the MA held it in high regard as a qualification, and there was some suggestion that it is more valued overseas than in the UK. Moreover, it appeared to be more than a coincidence that all those who completed the award at this school were from ethnic minority backgrounds, with any white British students who started later dropping out.

The interview with Zahir gave credibility to the notion that BME teachers attach greater importance to a master's degree, one of the reasons being their reduced potential for professional advancement without one, compared to their white peers. The aforementioned individual personality traits, therefore, might also be interpreted as similarly culturally influenced.

Every teacher interviewed at Laurel Way reported finding the module assessment tasks, submitted as written assignments, to be demanding. On being asked about the most challenging and rewarding aspects of study, 'passing' was viewed as more gratifying than the knowledge and understanding they acquired, even though all of them had found the academic content of considerable use to their classroom practice. It is the *acquisition* of the qualification that arguably serves BME teachers better than the knowledge gained.

While data collected by Arthur et al. (2006) indicated that the pressure of school work interfered with teachers' ability to complete assessed tasks, the current study appears to show that personal circumstances and school demands do not impede completion among those possessing certain attitudes of mind. I would reiterate that these attitudes have been reinforced by cultural expectations shared by many teachers whose families have emigrated from developing countries.

Conclusion

Initially, teachers at Laurel Way had enrolled onto the MA course because it was paid for, and school-based. Slightly over half of the original group later dropped out. During interviews, the aspects mentioned most in relation to retention were the tutor role, and support from their colleagues. When asked in the final interview question what the teachers thought it was about themselves that kept them going, an insight was obtained into the values held on an individual basis that helped to account for their tenacity. For Arthur et al. (2006), personal commitment, workplace culture and organisation provided by the higher education institution all impacted on the chances of successful completion of awards by teachers. Findings from the study at Laurel Way concurred with these factors, but with slightly different emphases, namely personal values, peer support and the tutor role.

It transpired that those personal values could be set in the context of the students' family backgrounds in order to provide an explanation for the ethnic make-up of the MA graduate cohort. The government-subsidised, school-based MA had a significant part to play in enabling highly motivated teachers at the case study school to attain an award that might not have been financially feasible otherwise. In so doing, it was also able to facilitate career progression for those whose social status can limit their upward mobility. It is suggested that with the funding now removed, equality of opportunity has taken a step backwards.

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- Contact:** m.etherington@uel.ac.uk